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UNIVERSITY MALL IS HOME TO NEW RETAIL TENANTS

By Barbara Young

The University Mall (the U Mall) on Dorset Street in South Burlington has opened several new stores this spring that cater primarily to women. It has also shifted its marketing emphasis by changing its branded look and hiring a new leasing firm to help the mall refocus its efforts to attract quality tenants.

In 2000, Christopher & Banks Corporation launched C.J. Banks, a specialty retailer of women's apparel in sizes 14 to 24. Seven years later, the company operates 237 CJ Banks stores nationwide. The one store in Vermont, located at the University Mall, opened this past March.

"We have color and that's a big one for our ladies. We're all about fashion," said store manager Lori Couture. "Greens and oranges this year are beautiful. They all are so vibrant. Some of the yellows have been very popular. One thing the ladies tell us all the time 'you guys are fashionable.'" The store targets women ages 30 to 55, she added. The 3,300-square-foot store is located near the Kohl's end of the mall next door to Borders.

The women's clothing at CJ Banks includes tops, shorts, capris, jeans, and shirts. The store does not sell dresses. "The store is a good fit for the U Mall and the area. This is one whole store that caters just to women size 14 and up. Business is going very well," said Couture.

Christopher & Banks Corporation, a specialty retailer of women's apparel sizes 4 to 16, owns CJ Banks. Publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange, Christopher & Banks is based in Minneapolis, Minnesota and operates 528 stores nationwide. Two of its stores are located in Vermont at the University Mall and the Diamond Run Mall in Rutland.

The Shoe Dept. opened its third Vermont store at the University Mall in April. The store offers brand-name family footwear for dress, casual, athletic, and work. The 4,043-square-foot store is located next to LensCrafters and the mall's customer service desk. The other two Vermont stores are at the Berlin Mall and the Diamond Run Mall. The privately held North Carolina-based company operates over 1,000 stores nationwide.

"Our women's business is insane. Young, old it doesn't matter. Our business is definitely going in the department of women," said store manager Sherri Kautz. "We have two-and-a-half aisles of women's shoes and one-and-a-half of men's and a back section of children's. We carry Aerosoles, Hush Puppies, Bandolinos, Aigner, Nine West, Mudd, and a lot of athletic shoes like New Balance, Nike, Asics, Skecher, and Timberland. Business is wonderful. I think the mall in general needed a general shoe store." The Shoe Dept. also sells accessories including handbags, wallets, and watches.

Champ Sports is undergoing a major renovation and will operate out of a temporary location next to American Eagle. The face lift is expected to be completed by mid-summer. The store has been located at the University Mall since it opened in 1988.

Champ Sports' 3,000-square-foot store is next to Applebee's. "The lease is up and it's normally a requirement of the mall to upgrade your look," said store manager Bill James. "The shoe wall will be moving and we are enlarging the shoe wall to give a greater impression with the shoes. The layout is actually flip-flopping. The shoes are now on the left and they will go to the right and will expand by 20 to 30 feet. We will be able to carry a larger selection. We will carry more shoes and make a bigger impression to our customers. It will fuel the fire. As we do better, we will get better product in."

James said the upgrade will also include removal of the apparel bays currently installed as an indented portion of the wall. The new walls will be flat, creating a more spacious look.

University Mall selected a new company in May to handle its leasing. Jones Lang LaSalle specializes in the remarketing of regional malls. "They lease a large amount of malls around the United States and they have more pull," said the mall's director of marketing, Geri Ann Higgins. University Mall is owned by University Mall LLC and managed by Finard Properties, LLC.

The U Mall has recently launched a new advertising look and retired its 17-year-old logo. The marketing department has added a new feature on the Website called Hot Picks of the Month. The monthly feature will promote a product with a photograph and brief description.

The owners recently announced an award of \$25,000 in college scholarships to five local students. To date, the company has awarded \$175,000 to help local families fund college expenses.

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